

PRISON MUSEUM POST

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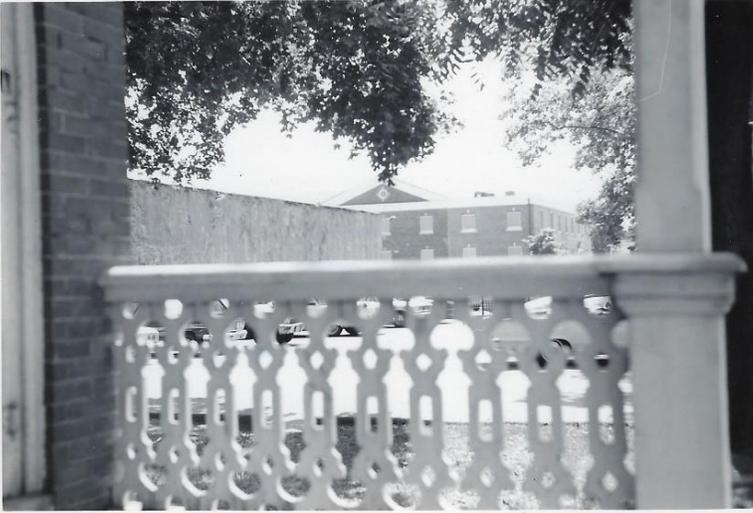
THANK YOU

We welcome new members and thank everyone who renewed their membership. Acknowledgement and thank-you letters are going out with this issue. Members who have not received a letter, or whose name does not appear on our membership list, should contact us.

THE ARMORY YEARS

In this issue we will take a look at the period of County Jail history between the time the Old Jail closed (November 23, 1965) and the time the current jail opened (September 2, 1989). Our interest in this was piqued when PMA member Stan Fayer provided us with photos of the Mount Holly Armory on Grant Street. The photo below, taken in 1965, shows the old building during the renovations that turned it into the county jail between 1965 and 1989.





The photo at left shows the Armory from the porch of the Warden's House on Grant Street. At the time the photo was taken in 1965, Stan was a very young guard in the very old jail. He was one of the first guards to step foot in the "new" facility. The building would be razed 33 years later, when in 1989 the current Jail, located directly beside it, was completed.

How did the old armory become the county jail? And what *is* an armory, anyway?

The Constitution (Article I, Section 8) reflects the Founding Fathers' unease with the idea of a standing army. While Congress got authority only to "raise and support" armies when needed, states had the authority to train and oversee local militias. These state militias stored their equipment and "mustered" (organized and drilled) in buildings designated as "armories". Congress had the authority to prescribe how these militias would be trained, and could call them up as needed.

Militias fought the War for Independence and the War of 1812, after which time they sort of fell into a state of disrepair. Enthusiasm waned in the absence of war. Equipment dwindled as the economy struggled. Militiamen went off to musters more to socialize than anything else. To essentially get around the militia system during the Civil War, the War Department created "volunteer" units, often largely made up of militia units. The federal government issued calls for volunteers; these volunteers were mostly from state militia units dating back to the War of Independence. (Many militias were named after the celebrated Revolutionary War general, Francis "Swamp Fox" Marion. One such group was the Marion Rifles of Burlington City. They along with the National Guards of Mount Holly acted as "guards" at executions, for example, the hanging of Philip Lynch in our Jail's Exercise Yard in 1860.)

After the Civil War, state militias grew in prominence again. The Militia Act of 1903 (also called The Dick Act) created the National Guard (out of the organized state militias) and the Reserve Militia. This gave the Army a lot more control over

militias. Since then, the National Guard and the Reserves have served with distinction in all major conflicts. Most states still have militia laws and 22 still have active militias.

Although New Jersey's state militia is currently inactive, it at one time had many militia groups. Mount Holly had a militia dating back to the 1820s, although it "reorganized" from time to time. We do not know where previous Mt. Holly armories were located, or exactly when the one on Grant Street was built. We do have a report in the July 8, 1922 issue of the *Courier-Post* saying that contracts had been awarded for the building of the new armory, and that excavation of the cellar was expected to start shortly. It apparently took quite a while to finish. But by April of 1926, the building was open and efforts were being made to reorganize the town militia. Many young men were expected to join up:

Mount Holly has had a military company for nearly a hundred years, and although in the past there were poor quarters and no remuneration for drills, the company roster always had contained the names of the best young men of Mount Holly. Today, with an armory that affords every facility and a stipulated amount of pay for each drill, every young man of the town and vicinity should take advantage of this opportunity to secure a military education. In addition to the facilities for drill in the armory, there is a recreation room, pool room, shower baths and the drill floor, which can be used for basketball, dancing and other forms of amusement, making it a club which all men may enjoy without any cost whatsoever. *Courier Post*, April 19, 1926

The article confirms that armories were used as much for socializing as mustering. Newspaper articles and advertisements speak of everything from flower shows to an indoor circus being held at the Armory. Boxing and wrestling matches were quite popular, although the Mount Holly chapter of the Women's Christian Temperance Union didn't like them one little bit. On March 4, 1926, the group met at the home of Eliza Claypoole and issued a petition, signed by President Elizabeth Budd, urging that the "disgraceful boxing bouts" be prohibited. The matches continued, however, into the next decade, as indicated by the 1931 newspaper advertisement to the right.

WRESTLING
Mount Holly Armory
Friday Eve., April 24
Geo. Godfrey¹⁹³¹
World's Champion Colored
Heavyweight Boxer
VS.
Leo Pudubny
AND
3—Other Bouts—3

As we have discussed in many past issues, fierce opposition to the 1954 decision to raze the Jail forced the Freeholders to change course and declare that the place would become a museum as soon as they decided on a replacement. Much to the exasperation of state prison inspectors, however, they took their good old time doing so. It wasn't until 1960 that they consulted with a jail specialist (a man from Texas named Roy Casey), who not surprisingly recommended that they not try to retrofit an existing building, but should instead build a new facility. He estimated that it would cost about \$700,000 and house between 125 and 140 prisoners. Despite the expert opinion, the Board decided to buy and retrofit the old Armory. The original contracts totaled only \$360,000, so it seemed like a real bargain.

Only it wasn't. Other fees, including architect fees and legal fees, pushed the final cost well past \$700,000. Mount Holly Township sued the County over lack of fireproofing; the County lost and had to pay for the fireproofing as well as the legal fees. A do-gooder group from Moorestown sued, urging that the Jail be built at the Cold-War-era Nike Missile Base site in Marlton. (*There was a missile base site in Marlton?!!* Yes, no kidding, Google it. Doesn't have anything to do with

sneakers.) They might have been right that the jail should have been located outside Mount Holly, but, if so, they were right for the wrong reasons. They thought that our prisoners, mostly misdemeanants at the time, could be "rehabilitated" in then-remote and bucolic Marlton. (These aren't "hard-boiled crooks", whined the group's leader.) In response, the exasperated Freeholder Director Edward Hulse pointed out to them in a public meeting in April of 1963 that 11.3 days, which was the average jail sentence, was too short a time to rehabilitate someone, and besides, the County didn't have the staff to man a "farm prison". For these exact same reasons, Robert Mills' ideas about rehabilitation sounded good in 1808 but were not very realistic. The group lost the suit, and the County lost the time and paid the legal fees.

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Please help us preserve and promote the museum by joining the PMA. Annual dues are \$15(individual)/\$25 (family). Membership benefits include a quarterly newsletter, event updates and free admission to the museum.

Go on the website for an application.

The renovation finally began in 1963 and was completed in 1965. Within a decade, nobody could argue that the 130-bed jail wasn't woefully deficient. In 1979, the inmates sued for better conditions. The result was a consent order in which they got indoor and outdoor recreation areas, a system better separating the violent convicts, and a reduction of the population to 117. The latter forced Assignment Judge Martin Haines to suspend many weekend-only sentences and order the transfer of many prisoners to the minimum-security facility in New Lisbon.



NEW JAIL BUILT IN 1989

Construction started on the new 184-bed jail in 1986. Work was delayed in 1987 when the contractor defaulted. It finally opened on September 2, 1989, when 175 men were marched over from the Armory. There they are on the left, carrying their bedding. The final cost - \$14.3 million.

It's ironic that one of the Jail's first inmates was by no means the sweet, tortured soul that the Moorestown group thought typified inmates at the Burlington County Jail in 1963. On November 3, 1989, Harvey Belcher of

Palmyra was arrested on a kidnapping charge. Shortly after being lodged in the new jail, he attempted suicide by leaping from a third-story cross-beam. How the 270-pound, 6'3" man survived is a mystery. He was also suspected of killing his common-law wife, who was missing. He was also wanted in Arkansas for killing her 2-year-old son and in Kentucky for beating a 79-year-old woman to death. The wife's body washed up on the shore of Petty's Island in Pennsauken in April, 1990. He had shot her right in the eye and dumped her body, weighed down by cinderblocks, in the Delaware. His murder trial, scheduled to start on October 28, 1990, was made unnecessary when a second suicide attempt proved successful on October 25. By that time he had figured out that it would be more effective to go head-first.

Destroy not the ancient landmarks which the fathers have set. Proverbs 22:28

FROM OUR OLD NEWSPAPERS

Let's leave it on a light note with three excerpts from 1875 from the *Mount Holly Herald*:

Six Mount Holly boys ranging from 10 to 15 years of age were arrested on Tuesday by Constable Lippincott and arraigned before Justice Brown, charged with stealing and destroying watermelons on the farm of Samuel E. Rogers, Jr. in Westampton. Mr. Rogers declined to prosecute and the boys were let off after receiving a severe reprimand from the Justice. Mr. Rogers has been greatly annoyed for years by desecrations upon his fruit crops by boys and he has now decided to give intruders a warm welcome. *Mount Holly Herald*, August 14, 1875

Isaac Simpson and Elizabeth Lee, of New Hanover, indicted for keeping a disorderly house and living together without marriage at the bogs of the Cranberry Park Association, were placed on trial and acquitted without the jury going out of the box, mainly on the evidence of W.F. Estill, the chief witness produced on the part of the State, who on cross-examination admitted that he had swindled farmers and others out of money by calling on them for aid to assist him in replacing buildings that he had falsely represented as having been destroyed by fire. Prosecutor Hendrickson was so completely disgusted with the perfidy and rascality of this "notorious" witness, that he abandoned the case. *Mount Holly Herald*, October 2, 1875

George Washington (colored) of Chesterfield, notwithstanding his patronymic individuality, was ignominiously consigned to the tender mercies of Warden Wilson at Trenton, for the space of two years, for breaking and entering and larceny. The name of Washington, with extenuating circumstances, saved George from a longer incarceration. *Mount Holly Herald*, October 9, 1875

THE NEXT ISSUE

In the next issue - another escape, new research about Robert Mills by one of our interns, and the last person executed for a murder in Burlington County, and much more!

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